

*PLAGIARISM IN UK
HIGHER EDUCATION:
IS THERE A
POSTCODE LOTTERY?*

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Focus of debate on
plagiarism/cheating...

.....has largely examined the general nature
of plagiarism - what it is and how to avoid
it.

Institutional focus on deterrence, detection
and punishment - little information on:

- levels of detection
- procedures for dealing with suspected
cases
- imposition of penalties

Generalised notion of academic
misconduct and an assumption that
there is

.....a common understanding of the
offences across universities

Variation in attitudes shown to exist
across and within institutions - between
module teams, certain types of activity are
considered by some staff as poor
academic practice rather than actual
misconduct, which others see as
misconduct.

Tennant(2007) - 25 different penalties.....

.....ranging from 'no further action' to 'expulsion' are available throughout the HE sector

- highlight the inconsistencies both across the sector and within institutions in the range of available penalties
- but the extent to which these penalties are applied in practice was not explored

Exponential growth in plagiarism in UK

If the number of web sites offering off-the-peg academic essays for sale is an indication of demand.....

(latest TurnitinSafely.com)

- Head of one of the companies providing bespoke online law essays claims to employ 500 law writers drawn from freelance academics, trainee solicitors and students.

Approach of the media to the problem....

.....might also be contributing to the creation of an atmosphere of reluctance amongst academics to openly discuss plagiarism

- Negative portrayal of plagiarism policies at a number of institutions – not the reality of the approach of either the institutions or higher education generally

Questionnaire: to obtain information.....

(1) on the types of academic misconduct and the frequency with which they occur

(2)to determine whether distinctions are made between major and minor instances of plagiarism

(3)to find out the cases which are processed through formal or informal procedures

Data: pre-and post-1992 universities...

.....are trying to tackle this issue - plagiarism treated as a serious institutional matter and genuine interest in combating the problem

- variation in procedures to deal with minor and major incidents and the extent to which informal procedures are used
- widespread inconsistency in approach in all stages of the process

What constitutes a 'minor' incident?

Striking variation in how this is defined

- amount of text considered to constitute a minor incident of plagiarism ranged from less than 10 per cent to less than 50 per cent of the work being unreferenced.
- one institution - difference between 10 per cent of unreferenced material dispersed through an essay being less serious than 10 per cent lifted straight from an unreferenced source

Respondents unwilling to quantify a minor incident in terms of percentage.....

.....three pre 1992 and six post 1992 institutions were more comfortable with providing examples of the factors taken into account in defining the conduct

- Virtually all cases the tendency was to avoid formal procedures and treat academic misconduct as a minor case to be dealt with informally either within the school or within the module team

Burden of proof?

□ Institution where less than 50 per cent of unreferenced material is treated as a minor incident said the institutional plagiarism policy requires the offence to be proved beyond reasonable doubt

- as a consequence very few cases are upheld when formal procedures are invoked

Even where the institutional policy defines academic misconduct as an offence of strict liability.....

.....a number of factors are considered when a case of suspected plagiarism or cheating is initially identified

It was also apparent that where the institutional academic misconduct policy is considered to be harsh, individuals stray away from its strict implementation.

What becomes clear from the findings....

.....is the extent to which individual discretion is exercised in determining whether an incident is treated as major or minor and the striking lack of parity that students experience at different institutions

The confusion and disagreement of how plagiarism is defined.....

.....within and across institutions was confirmed by the responses to the question about whether detection of academic misconduct was routinely monitored across modules

- ▣ no evidence that levels of detection are monitored
- ▣ much disagreement about what may or may not constitute an incident of misconduct

One post 1992 respondent said.....

.....the consequence of a finding of academic misconduct on a law student's file was so far reaching that he suspected that staff would deal with the matter informally by reducing the mark for the work and perhaps having a 'quiet' word with the student

JCQ Awarding Bodies and Plagiarism

When to inform the Awarding Body

- Only if a student has signed a declaration that the work is that of the student

When Awarding Body does not need to be notified

- Declaration not signed
- staff advised to find out how institution records instances of plagiarism (other staff/department)

Baroness Ruth Deech.....

Former Head of the Office of the Independent Adjudicator has condemned the “indefensible inconsistency” of punishments imposed on cheating students.(THES 2006)
